

200 Miles By Thistle (or how we did the Texas 200, 2023 Edition)



Pre-ambule: So, when I tried to explain the Texas 200 to landlubbers, I was met with looks of disbelief and the reoccurring “why?” However, when I explained that we were going to be cruising on the Texas Riviera, that was met with much better enthusiasm for our adventure. During this trip we met Lindsey James, who explained that his description was that he was “yachting” for the week. So, what follows is the story of how we went “Yachting On The Texas Riviera!”

So back in '21 Matt (my son), Jacob (my son-in-law) and I attempted to do the Texas 200. However, a tropical depression swung the winds around to the NE and what should have been a nice reach up the coast (at least that is the way the Texas 200 is described, right?) turned into a tack fest. We made the Land Cut camp on day 1. Bird Island, Wind Surfing Beach on day 2, and pulled out at 8:00pm at Port Aransas on day 3.

This year, Matt was not available (seems he blew his vacation time on a honeymoon. I know, misplaced priorities, I blame his mother), but Jacob was game so here we go!

I was not able to get started on preparation until the Thursday before we left when I hooked up the trailer and ran 30 minutes up the freeway to see how everything ran. Tires and bearings were cool, but I did not like the sound of the right side bearing so Friday morning I was up calling about to see who could replace race and bearings on a single axle boat trailer, “today.” Many thanks to ProMechanic in Round Rock who did the work. I had to go fetch the bearings from Magnum Trailer and deliver them, and it was expensive but when the sun set, there were fresh bearings on the trailer.

Also on Friday, I made an airport run to pick-up Jacob, we hit the HEB to get provisions, and got everything packed and loaded into the Jeep.

So Saturday, after breakfast with the Better Half, Jacob and I hooked the boat up and headed South!

Bouncing down the Texas Roads saw our first casualty, the Poly Pro winch line broke at the hook. Lost the hook and had to pull over and tie the winch line to the bow loop. Fortunately, I also secure the boat with the bow line, so all was not lost!

Then, when we were within 45 minutes of Port Isabel, we stopped for a drink and pit stop. While accelerating back to highway speeds Jacob (driving) notices a shimmy in the trailer. We pulled back over to shoulder where we found that the left trailer tire had a broken belt. Still inflated but not rolling true. So back up to highway speed and I am madly searching for Discount Tire Stores.

Discount Tire did not have a wheel/tire combo that would fit. 14" wheel and tire did not even fit under the fender, and the 13" combo fit, but rubbed on the frame. But the angel working there found and had us go get from Harbor Freight a pair of trailer wheels/tires that did fit. He even swapped the tires and got everything properly torqued for us. And this is why I spend my money at Discount Tire!

So, an hour and a half down, and we get back on the freeway headed to Port Isabel and then across the causeway to the KOA Camp Ground on South Padre.

We made it to KOA before the office closed and got checked in. Before you drive into the complex, they put you in an electric golf cart with a guide who drives you around and shows you what is up. Went down to the boat ramp, where I explained what we were doing and where I was planning on leaving the boat, which was going to be anchored in the shallows just to the North of the boat ramps. Problem was...



...that this comes ashore right in that area. Seems Space X has their own shuttle service! Anyway, we realized that KOA had blocked off one of the ramps, so we got permission to leave the boat along the dock in the blocked off ramp. Saturday evening saw us with the boat floating, the trailer secured for the night, all the gear we needed for the 200 mile yachting adventure in the cabin, and a change of cloths in the Jeep.

Sunday saw us up at 6:00am, hooking up the now empty trailer and heading back over the causeway to the mandatory skippers meeting at the White Sands Hotel and Bar. We got there early and were one of the first to check in and get our tokens for the Burgee, Bus Ride Back, and two Shrimp Dinners! Skippers meeting was the normal "you may die," "you are the captain of your ship," "ships in the Corpus Christi Ship Channel Don't Yield," "keep your radio on so you hear when people want you," etc. When the meeting was over, I abandoned Jacob to the Island Wave Free Shuttle to get back over the causeway and headed 4 hours North to Magnolia Beach. I pulled over at the same exit as the Discount Tire to hit the Lowes. We needed some hardware to repair the trailer (did I say that we had a vibration) and pick-up parts that might let us reef the main, maybe. Anyway, 20 minutes later and I am peddling North again. Lots of DPS collecting autographs along the way, and the security check point was open, saying

“hi” to everyone. I knew what they were doing, what they wanted to see, and had all the window rolled down before I even got to the guy. He looked at me, glanced in the open windows and waved me through. I never came to a complete stop! I know that they asked other sailors if they were US citizens, and did they know that there was no boat on their trailer!

In spite of my stops, fuel and bio breaks, I was first to the T&J stop. Went in, said I was with the Texas 200 and how did the trailer parking work? I am pretty sure that I got it wrong because everyone on my side of the driveway was parked in one direction, and the other side of the driveway was facing the other way. I did not realize that the driveway allowed for drive-through and spun my rig around so I would drive out the way I came in. Note to the Texas 200 Advisory Committee, a picture from a drone with some simple sketches will make sure that we are all on the same page. Or at least facing the same way!

So, I grabbed the computer and hot spot, went into the bar area and got an hour worth of work done before the pulled pork sandwich fixings arrived. At that point I put everything back in the car, grabbed a bite and visited with some of the other sailors. @ 2:00 we loaded up on two charter buses (enough room that I had two seats to myself) and waited. Seems there was a major wreck on the one road into Magnolia Beach and it was closed, both directions. Even worse, there were sailors trapped on the other side of the wreck. After 30 minutes everyone had managed to get to the T&J and the busses pulled away. 4 hrs of driving plus a pit stop at the half way point and I was disembarking from the bus, back at the White Sands Hotel. 2 blocks later and I am at the Wave Free Shuttle stop, hoping I am not too late for the 7:00 pick-up. Around 7:20 a bus pulls up. It is the wrong route, but it goes over the causeway and stops at the transit station that is within walking distance of the KOA. Back at the KOA I meet up with Jacob and another Sailor, Lindsey who still had his car (long story that he will have to share, but this Texas 200 group is a really great group of people). We went together and grabbed a great dinner and then back to the cabin, AC, Shower, and bed.

Day 1, Monday.

Up @ 6:00, breakfast bars, and we start moving all our stuff down to the boat. Did I mention that our cabin was all the way on the other side of the complex? Anyway, Jacob went chasing ice and I started the 1st of several trips with gear. Fortunately, there was a spigot available at one of the camp sites down by the docks, so I did not have to carry the two 5gal bladders the whole way. Eventually we got everything secure on the boat and at 8:00 we saw Lindsey off and then we raised our sails and cast off ourselves! We figured that we would try going upwind and if we could manage the wind, we would continue to the ship channel and take the outside route down to Port Mansfield. If it was too much for the two of us, we would just turn and head for the ICW. Well, the wind was great. Enough to move the boat but not overpower the two of us. Port tack out of the KOA, a couple of short hitches to stay close to the island and we were in the channel. No traffic, no current, no problem. 30 minutes of sailing and we rounded the end of the Jetties and pointed the bow North. We put the jib on the spinnaker pole to help it fly and were on our way. Except for.....I look up and see what appears to be the backbone of a dinosaur on the surface up ahead of us. Seems they are pumping sand to the beach, and we were headed for the floating end where the dredge hooks up to the piping to pump the sand slurry to the beach. Rather unnerving to see something blocking your way when you are $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile off the beach. Anyway, it pays to never devote all your attention to the sails! We found another dinosaur a little further up the beach. As the day progressed, the wind and waves increased, and we were getting some great surfing rides. The navigator did a great job, although I got nervous, and we took a jibe to get closer to the beach. Eventually, as the navigator predicted, the Mansfield Jetties showed up when and where they were supposed to and we slid in, between the navigational buoys. Having now seen the

Camp location at the Jetties, I understand why people make the trip out there. Looks just beautiful but we decided camp was where our friends were, and we headed West down the channel. Heavy winds, smooth waters and we covered the 5 miles in less than an hour. While the area is a little muddy, and it got worse as we all stomped thru the mud, once ashore, this was a great location. We were high enough that the sand was dry, even at depth (we found in '21, at the LandCut camp that while the surface might appear dry, beauty was truly skin deep and that just below the surface was the foul, smelly, sticky, muck that you waded thru getting ashore). We were glad to have day one behind us and sleep came easy.

Day 2, Tuesday

Can you say BLOW? So, we broke camp and got the boat loaded and were underway around 8:00. We were not the first boat off the beach, but not the last. Headed West until we hit Red Marker #24 where we turned right to a heading of 340'. So, showing off my "vintage," I grew up with AAA Trip Tiks where you got a turn-by-turn flip book that got you from "A" to "B". In preparation for this event, I create a daily sheet that has the critical navigational information on it. Each day's preparation involves getting the daily sheet to the top of the stack and then everything goes in the waterproof bag. So, based on Navionics, talking with other sailors, and best guess, we sail!

So, we are Full Main and Jib. We saw the larger boats that could not cut the corner and took the Mansfield Channel West until it intersected the ICW where they could turn North all off our Port Stern. We passed all of them this way. And we march North across the Laguna Madre. Were we the only ones that collected the sea grass along the way? Seems like every 10 minutes we would have to push the sea grass off the rudder so we could steer. Eventually we made the land cut and were ripping along. Each puff was a little stronger, so we doused the jib and were planning along at 8-10 with gusts that pushed us even faster. With us running almost dead down wind, there was no way to depower the main and we still had a long way to go so, down with the main and up with the jib. We reached the end of the land cut, did not see anyone ahead of us and did not want to be first into Yarborough so we stopped at what looked like a nice sandy beach on the right, on the last island before the open water of Baffin Bay. We spent an hour waiting for and watching a few boats slide by. And no, it was not a nice sandy beach but a thin crust over the typical land cut muck. So with a few boats ahead of us, we fold up the shade, wash the mud and muck off of the chairs, loaded everything back into the boat, raised the jib and we are on the way to Yarborough.

We thought we could sneak thru the little cut that advertised 5' of water....



...and maybe it is there but we just bumped bottom every time we left the ICW. And all the while it was blowing 28-30 with gusts even higher. So, we followed the example set by several of the boats that had sailed by while we waited and took shelter on this little spit of "land". We were glad to be secure, in good (????) company with the day of sailing complete.



There was no setting up a tent on the "land" due to the 30 mph winds and oyster shells, so we slept on the boat listening to the wind howling thru the rigging. Much to both of our surprise, if you are tired enough, even the bench on a Thistle can be good sleeping. Of course, we did put our sleeping pads down first! And many thanks to Tommy who let us board and cook in the relative calm of his cockpit. Getting out of the wind sure helped. While windy, it was a relatively clear night with lots of stars to gaze at when not passed out. What was really neat, in the middle of the night when answering the call, the tinkle sparkled! When the equipment was properly stowed and I was back on the bench, I ran a hand through the water just to confirm that there really was bio-luminescence, and not my imagination. Really speaks to how clean the waters on the coast are getting.

Day 3, Wednesday

Breakfast bars and two pots of French Press and we are underway. Beautiful sail North across Baffin Bay. We saw the Sand Dunes, the Bird Island Basin where we spend the 2nd night in '21, ran out of the channel chasing a red buoy that was out of position, and eventually made it to Snoopy's. We got permission to tie up on the "T" pier and while we were on the weather side of the pier, we positioned the boat with bow and stern lines, so she rode just fine with no contact on the dock. Lunch was great and we just stayed at Snoopy's most of the afternoon, meeting new friends, swapping lies, and hanging out. We know that many of our fellow sailors could not resist the Siren's Song and spent the night in harbor, but we eventually grabbed ice, beer, a little more water and cast off. We got nervous about chasing the official camp site and eventually joined some friends on the right side of the channel, right

before exiting into Corpus Christi Bay. Turned out to be a great spot with sandy bottom. Really nice to ditch the shoes and just go bare footed. Not much room for a tent and sleeping in the boat was working! We did hear a couple of mosquitoes but a quick shot of deepwoods off on our feet, hands, and a dusting on the face and we were good. So, sleeping on the boat, in the open means that we kept our long sailing pants on, and our sailing shirts, plus we added a wind breaker (later, after things cooled off). So, with the hood of the sailing shirt pulled up, along with the buff, all of which was covered by the hood of the wind breaker, and there just is not much exposed skin to get bitten. Anyway, next year might include a boat tent and this year did not involve mosquito bites.

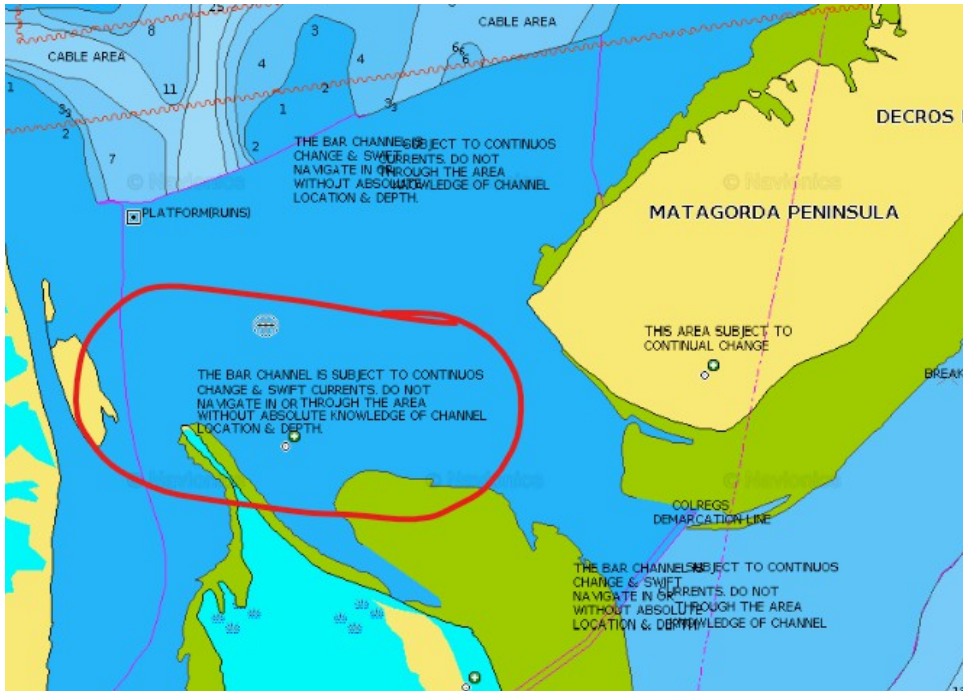
Day 4, Thursday

Sunrise saw us breaking camp and getting ready when we see an armada sailing towards us, down the ICW from Marker 37 Marina! Lots of sails, really pretty. So, we raised sails and joined the armada. It was fun to see everyone spread out across the bay. Large boats following the ICW, small boats chasing an inside passage at Shamrock Island, and the rest of the fleet headed towards Stingray Hole. While we crossed the bay with Main and Jib, when we started picking our way thru Stingray Hole we doused the jib. Once through the passage we tightened up and could hold the Southern edge of the ship channel. As always, it is fun watching all the traffic and we made good time up the channel. Until we got into the lee of the Port Aransas buildings. At that point we raised the jib to have a little more speed and predictability for the ferry boats and with no traffic "in our way" we crossed the channel and headed North in the Lydia Ann Channel. From here on, we were blazing new trails since we pulled out in Port Aransas in '21. We held the channel until Green Marker #47 and then headed across the bay towards Pauls Mott. Across the shallows off the point and then onto the beach! We were the second boat there, but Chris launched from Port Aransas so we felt pretty good! Pauls Mott is a great camp site and based on the number of boats that made the camp, we were not the first to think this! We had a great afternoon watching the fleet come in, and in the evening, we had a remembrance for a gentleman who had "crossed over the sandbar" since the previous Texas 200. I cannot think of a better group of ruffians to remember me when I get called home. We also fired Buddy's little cannon from the point. Turns out my cigar came in handy for lighting the cannon fuse. I had to share with the wife that my cigars are more than taste, they are essential supplies that we must have with us just in case we ever need to fire a cannon! As rocky (oyster) as Pauls Mott is, we decided to save the tent and slept on the boat.

Day 5, Friday

We were not yet ready to tackle the shallow water associated with the Easterly path on the way to Pass Cavallo, so pushing off from Pauls Mott we headed North towards the ICW along with a parade of boats. Great sail and fun waves across San Antonio Bay. Having the radio on was helpful as we approached the Victoria Barge Canal. There was a dredging operation taking up part of the ICW and there were two barges heading South, and we were all meeting in the same area. As a sailor, I feel safer staying to weather of all the barge traffic but via radio, we learned that the barge captain wanted to keep the nose of his barge string as far to windward as possible and he wanted to pass us, Starboard to Starboard. Also heard the barge captains talking about the Weekend Warriors. We so wanted to point out that this was not the weekend, we were weekday warriors, but we resisted! Anyway, we eventually found smooth water as we headed toward Port O'Connor. However, while the water was smooth, the winds were very fluky, shifting direction and velocity. I am not sure, but maybe the waves in the bay but steady wind are better combination. Eventually we cleared the Port O'Connor jetties and tightened up to a Starboard Tack, going to windward. Big waves that we were beating into, made for a wet ride but

eventually we found the lee side of the Matagorda Peninsula where we tacked and headed South West along the island following the deep water. That is until we reached.....



...where Navionics gives up and says, "heck if I know." We could see a single sailboat in camp so we thought we knew where to go but.....



...we found out later that Google Maps or Google Earth gives much better idea of where the water is. So we ran aground in the middle and ended up walking the boat thru the shallows until we got close to camp where the water got deep again. So back in the boat, paddle and sail with jib across the channel,

against the ebb tide to make camp. Turns out the boat we saw was Travis Votaw, with sons Steven and John. They had shade and were willing to share which was wonderful since I was completely spent after our hike across the sand bar. Seems the Votaw's had arrived out there on Wednesday and were enjoying the beach. It is a wonderful beach but the current rips thru there, both ways. With the soft sand we were back in the tent for the night! This was a great camp but is really had to get into. We watched several of the boats that joins us struggle to find water as they motored into camp and we believe one keel boat spend the night aground in the bay.

Day 6, Saturday.

Final sail, so we pushed off and headed for Magnolia Beach. We followed Navionics, using the Sonar Feature that was recommended by the Votaw's. Still bumped the bottom off and on, almost to the Jetties. Once at the Jetties, we hardened up to a reach and were screaming towards Magnolia Beach. We drove the boat hard, main and jib, using the rail and hiking straps and it was a blast. We would ride up on a wave, drop the bow into the trough and hang on, as the spray flew. The Hobie 21' Sport Cruiser was just cruising under the Jib alone but when they saw how much fun we were having, they raised their main and the race was on! We hung tough but they slowly marched away, to beat us to Magnolia Beach. Great fun. Magnolia Beach was as nice a sailing location as described. Deep water right up until it wasn't. Pat Hollabaugh met us at the beach and took our picture. I will cherish this picture forever....



So, a shower, a pile of shrimp, and 3hrs of road time and we were home! Hard to believe that it was over. Bed felt wonderful, AC was nice, and the room felt like it was rocking. Can we talk about next year?

Random Details.

Thistle is a One Design Class. 17', 515 lbs, Main & Jib combined are 191 sqr feet. It carries a Spinnaker that adds another 220 sqr feet. We flew the spinnaker in the light air of day 1 in '21 but never set the sail this trip.



Cooking was done over a Jet Boil. We had two pots. One was set-up as a French Press and we used it for morning coffee.

Breakfast was coffee and breakfast bars. We did oatmeal in '21 but decided that it was not worth the time in the morning.

Lunch consisted of snacks. Oranges, trail mix, jerky (cut into bite sized pieces) and gummy bears. We also had packets of electrolytes to add to our drinking water.

We carried 10 gallons of water and got another 2.5 gallons of water at Snoopy's. Drink lots of water out there. Then drink some more!

Dinner was an assortment of seasoned rice packages that could be added to the boiling water, or pre-cooked packaged starches that only needed heating. We would then add protein in the form of tuna fish, or chicken, or even brisket. Note to self: Pot Roast with Gravy is NOT to be served next trip.

Until we meet again, keep on "yachting"